

Performance is Born of These Three Things

It's me again, Sundae Schneider-Bean – an intercultural specialist, coach and trainer based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. I am back this month to give you a look behind-the-scenes of my own transition from Switzerland to West Africa and offer expert advice on how you can enjoy your own cross-cultural adventures.

This month's newsletter builds upon the first of this two-part series. In the September issue, I focused on how critical it is to know the "whys" and "hows" when you take the plunge into a new life as well as the importance of concentrating first on connecting with the people in your new environment.

Connecting with people from different backgrounds is one of three criteria of effectiveness of IBI's CPE Model of Intercultural Effectiveness. This month we shift attention to the second and third criterion. I will share how something as simple as being clear about your roles and responsibilities in an expatriate context can enhance your **performance**. Even better, by revisiting your "whys" you can make sure you **enjoy** the journey.

As you might expect, making the move from Switzerland to Burkina Faso required a huge shift in many aspects of my life, both professionally and personally. Change is inherently part of expatriate life. For me personally, this move led to simultaneously letting go of old roles and responsibilities and taking on new ones (admittedly some more welcome than others). Suddenly, I had gone from corporate employee to independent business owner, language competent community member to new language learner, "regular" wife to trailing spouse. [1]

To be perfectly honest, while I did carry out some of my responsibilities enthusiastically, others I executed stubbornly while metaphorically kicking and screaming. What I can share from this transition experience from Switzerland to West Africa is that **effectively performing in complex cultural contexts requires an immense amount of clarity, mindfulness and flexibility**. Using your own personal insights, work through the three steps below to increase your performance and enjoyment.

By Sundae Schneider-Bean



1. Seek Clarity

It is often overlooked that we bring our “whole self” to work. When moving abroad for an international assignment, we are expected to perform well in a specific role, yet the new assignment (and life change) may bring a host of other responsibilities and challenges. For you to perform optimally and still enjoy the adventure, it is critical that you get clear on the most important roles in your life. Here is how:

Step 1: Make an extensive list of your roles and responsibilities.

Review the list to ensure that it includes professional and personal roles, your immediate and extended family responsibilities, and any community-related commitments.

Don't forget to list aspects of your life where you are required to develop new skills or acquire new knowledge, with a special focus on the cultural knowledge and behaviors that are important to build in your new life. Among your new responsibilities may be improving foreign language skills, adapting your communication style to the local context or finding creative and effective ways to influence key stakeholders in your environment. You can check how you currently deal with these demands by assessing your competences with the Intercultural Readiness Check (IRC), which provides a road map to understand your personal journey to effective intercultural interactions in your new environment.

Here is a sample of what was on my list the first year of living in Burkina Faso:

- Effectively support and parent my newly transitioned third-culture kids
- Gain skills in co-managing Burkinabé household staff
- Support my partner and family as a trailing spouse
- Develop my French conversation skills
- Gain a deeper awareness of how time, status and relationships are approached in Burkina Faso
- Lead my own business.

Being clear on your (seemingly endless) roles and responsibilities is crucial before taking the next step.

2. Be Mindful

Carefully selecting where you dedicate your precious energy enables you to perform when it matters most.

Step 2: Set priorities based on relative importance and urgency.

In the initial months of our lives in Ouagadougou, my role as a trailing spouse (aka – the person who unpacks the boxes) and parent of third-culture kids took priority over my role as a business owner. I would have loved to snap my fingers and discover that the house was magically unpacked, furnished, and the Internet installed. However, this simply was not the case. Until I helped fulfill the important task of settling the family, I had to shift into a lower gear in my business.

Knowing this stopped me from resenting or constantly resisting my situation and set realistic expectations for myself and my clients.

A conscious investment of your energy based on your top priorities coupled with patience in the process will help you achieve what you set out to accomplish, one step at a time.

3. Get Flexible

When you are taking on a new life with this level of complexity and pressure to perform, do this conscientiously:

Step 3: Check-in and adjust regularly.

Take stock:

- How well are my intercultural competences serving me? How well am I able to communicate? Build commitment with others on shared goals? Deal with uncertainty? Be truly interested in others' beliefs, norms and values? [2]
- Find a culturally-appropriate way of gaining feedback from your new colleagues. Ask them about your strengths. Seek insight on how you can deal with your pitfalls.
- How do your family members perceive your general well-being?
- Is your work performance at the sacrifice of other important areas of your life (such as your role as a parent or spouse)?
- How do you feel when you wake up in the morning?

Based on these assessments, you may conclude it's time to adjust a few things in your day-to-day approach. **Small regular adjustments are easier than major realignments down the road.**

You are the expert in your life – you know the right place to start: What are 1-2 small steps you can take today to realign with your current priorities?

If you still find yourself reluctant or unmotivated to make changes, it is time to refocus on the joy within the adventure.

Revisit Your “Why” to Keep Enjoying the Experience

Moments of frustration or “slumps” are inevitable and likely a sign it is time to revisit your “whys”.

Just recently I was feeling trapped in Ouagadougou and unadventurous [3]. By comparing my life at that moment with my “whys,” it was obvious that I had become overly focused on my day-to-day chores. After answering these questions for myself, I realized it had been weeks since I had made time to do the very things I moved here to experience, such as exploring the area or attending cultural events. The remedy was simple, involving a bumpy car ride to a remote lunch spot two hours from Ouagadougou.

When a slump strikes, ask yourself:

- What exactly did I originally want to experience or gain?
- What feels like it is missing?
- What is one small thing I could do this week to bring the spirit of adventure back into my life?

Your answers will help you quickly identify what is out of alignment and to find the right strategies for enjoying your journey. What are you waiting for?

IRC Licensee Sundae Schneider-Bean is an intercultural specialist, coach and trainer based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso (West Africa). She is the founder of Trailblazing Spouse®, a program designed to help trailing spouses live in closer alignment with their passions and skills.

[1] A trailing spouse is a term for the accompanying partner on an expatriate assignment.

[2] These are the core competencies measured by the Intercultural Readiness Check.

[3] During the review and publication of this contribution, Burkina Faso underwent a political revolution. Sundae reports that this has satisfied her need for adventure, for the moment.